

POP MUSIC REVIEW

Room at the Top for EWF

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Everyone expected members of Earth, Wind and Fire, the flashy rhythm and blues group, merely to walk on stage at the Inglewood Forum Wednesday night. Instead, they entered from the ceiling.

Huge, dark, glass capsules descended to the stage at the beginning of the show, the first of EWF's two-night engagement. Suddenly, lights went on inside the capsules, revealing the group in stiff poses. Amid the shrieks of glee from the nearly full house, the musicians leaped out wearing glittering outfits, featuring giant capes. They started dancing wildly around stage. The crowd didn't stop cheering until the hour-and-45-minute concert ended.



MAURICE WHITE

. . . flash from the ceiling.

Times photo by Larry Armstrong

This show is not nearly as elaborate or outrageous as the one put on by Parliament-Funkadelic, the most theatrical of the R and B groups. EWF sports gaudy costumes and always installs new stunts for each tour, but still devotes nearly all of its show to basic, sledgehammer R and B music.

On Wednesday night, the 13 boisterous EWF members, led by singer-percussionist Maurice White, performed a half-vocal, half-instrumental set that was consistently excellent. The material ranged from EWF oldies like "That's the Way of the World," "Sing a Song" and "Getaway" to songs from the new album "All 'n' All." White, with the support of falsetto harmonies, handled most of the lead vocals. He doesn't have the flair to grab an audience like Rod Stewart or James Brown but doesn't really need it since the show is designed to stress instrumentals rather than vocals.

EWF, organized by White in 1970, started as a no-frills, jazz-oriented band. It slowly became popular as White, a drummer for pianist Ramsey Lewis in the late '60s, gradually abandoned his purist concepts and recognized the value of old-fashioned entertainment. He began to simplify the music, downplaying the jazz and emphasizing R and B rhythms and foolproof stylistic elements borrowed from Sly Stone. White also added costumes, sets and stunts, making EWF the first major black group to use theatrics extensively. As a result, it became the first black band since Sly Stone's heyday to achieve superstar status.

Please Turn to Page 24, Col. 1

EWF AT FORUM

Continued from First Page

An EWF show is one of the few in pop music that is totally devoted to bouncy, danceable rhythms. Even the concerts starring R and B master James Brown slow down frequently for him to sing ballads. EWF sometimes used medium-tempo material but included only a few brief slow-ballad segments. Being a percussionist, White understands the value of rocking rhythms. In addition to his percussion instruments EWF's music is powered by two drummers. It's a show for hip-shakers and foot-stomper. People were dancing in their seats, in the aisles and in the hallways. When the group was in the midst of a particularly sizzling number, people were dancing from place to place rather than walking.

The EWF exit just before the encore was as spectacular as the entrance. Men in space suits walked on stage and summoned a large silver pyramid from the ceiling and helped the members of the band into the structure. The pyramid was rising back up when it collapsed in midair—empty. Everyone was wondering how they had disappeared when the men in the space suits lifted off their huge headwear and presto!—there were the missing musicians. EWF should have concluded with that marvelously deceptive stunt. The encore, though buoyant and expertly performed, was anticlimactic.



Two acts that are part of White's expanding production empire—the group Pockets and singer Deniece Williams—opened the show. The Williams set was largely unsuccessful because she committed a deadly sin—bringing to the Forum an act that belongs in a nightclub or small concert hall. The Forum swallows up solo singers who don't have a lot of upbeat—or at least loud—numbers to capture the attention of the people in the far balconies. Williams, who cowrites most of her material, primarily used slow songs that only had a chance in a more intimate atmosphere.

Hearty support from her band would have helped but she didn't get it. It was difficult to figure out whether the musicians were just lackadaisical or whether they were handcuffed by plodding arrangements.

Williams' sultriness, an essential ingredient to the success of her material, only registered with those near the stage. Also, her songs are most effective when you follow the lyrics. Because of the sound system the lyrics were garbled most of the time. That erratic system also injected a whine into her voice and made it sound hollow, filtering out much of its richness and warmth.

Williams often did what most singers do when confronted with a king-sized hall—resort to shouting. She stepped out of her style and mounted an all-out, Aretha Franklin-style vocal blitz. Normally Williams uses a low-key version of Franklin's frenzied style. When Williams cranked up her own style to reach the fevered pitch of Franklin's, the result was a poor imitation of the Queen of Soul.